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James Baldwin, corporate media and the red herring of 'Black antisemitism'

written by Lev Koufax
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James Baldwin addresses a crowd after participating in the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in support of voting rights, March 1965.

In 1967, the great African American writer James Baldwin wrote an article that

explored the relationship between the Jewish and Black communities, and in particular, the justified anger the Black community felt towards Jewish landlords and businesspeople in major U.S. cities.

For decades, dating back to the great migration of southern Black people to northern and midwestern U.S. cities, Jewish business owners and landlords engaged in practices of exploitation and racism to prove their value to the white ruling class.

Jewish landlords charged Black families exorbitant rents. Jewish capitalists often denied service to Black individuals at their small businesses.

Baldwin details this reality in “[Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White](#),” a title that doesn’t quite mean what it might first appear to mean. The article is ultimately a call for a legitimate reconciliation between the Jewish and Black communities, and for both communities to turn their attention to the real enemy.

Baldwin wrote: “Our parents were lashed to futureless jobs, in order to pay the outrageous rent. We knew that the landlord treated us this way only because we were colored and he knew that we could not move out.

“The grocer was a Jew, and being in debt to him was very much like being in debt to the company store. The butcher was a Jew, and we certainly paid more for meat than [white] New York citizens, and very often carried insults home, along with the meat.”

Baldwin went on to describe how in isolated mid-20th century Black New York neighborhoods, the Jewish small business owners and landowners executed the racist will of the larger and more powerful white ruling class. To many Black families, it felt like Jewish business owners ran every aspect of their life.

Unfortunately, this resentment, stoked by ruling class “model minority” politics, has

grown into pockets of antisemitism and the growth of “Black Hebrew Israelite” ideology. This homophobic, transphobic and capitalist ideology posits that the contemporary Jewish community are evil fraudsters who stole the identity of Judaism and to this day manipulate the global economy.

It is an ideology that ignores history and does nothing but divide two communities that should be united in solidarity against capitalism and racism – two communities that at times have been in solidarity against racism.

Black celebrities

Even more unfortunately, this ideology has taken hold among a few Black celebrity icons.

In recent weeks, [Kanye West](#) and [Kyrie Irving](#) have drawn significant backlash for antisemitic comments. In West’s case, he openly asserted that Jews run the planet and donned a “[white lives matter](#)” t-shirt along with fascist talk show host Candace Owens.

If that wasn’t bad enough, West also openly attacked and maligned members of [George Floyd’s family](#).

West is known for his open admiration for Hitler and his belief that Jews control all global events from the shadows. Irving’s comments were a little more complicated, but still ultimately misguided.

Irving received a great deal of criticism and media attention after he tweeted support for the film, “Hebrews to Negroes.” Among other things, this film argues that the Holocaust was a fabrication and that that modern Jewry are born from a satanic cult that stole the Jewish identity from Black Africans.

To be abundantly clear, this ideology is harmful, inaccurate, and ultimately

capitalist. The goal of the Black Hebrew Israelite ideology is not the liberation of all people from capitalist oppression, but to simply replace the perceived Jewish global cabal as the head of the exploitative global imperialist system.

It must be acknowledged that this ideology grew from a legitimate resentment felt in the Black community against Jewish landlords in New York City and Chicago neighborhoods that sought to control and oppress their Black tenants and neighbors.

It flows logically that this resentment could grow into a conspiracy-based ideology, based on experiences with racist Jews trying to prove their worth to wealthy white non-Jews, in the absence of a revolutionary, multinational working-class movement.

Inequality, then and now

It's not as if the racist inequality apparent between the Jewish and Black communities has changed since Baldwin recorded his perspective more than 50 years ago. Jews in the U.S. are able to achieve higher-paying jobs, management positions and political office at a far higher rate than individuals in the Black community due to the Jewish community's relative privilege.

The ruling class has for centuries elevated certain oppressed groups to divide the working class and police the most oppressed. In the United States, the Jewish community has long provided managers, small business owners and academics to the ranks of the capitalist system.

The core contradiction of the U.S. Jewish community is the ability of Jewish individuals to become wealthy and obtain positions of power, while buying into the false belief that they will eventually be fully accepted into mainstream white society.

The vast majority of Black people in the U.S struggle through economic warfare, crumbling schools and racist police terror to simply survive, and have little or no

opportunity to rise to positions of wealth and power.

This isn't to say that Irving's views on the Jewish community are to be condoned or accepted, let alone West's antisemitism, sexist harassment of his ex-wife, or – to be frank – his support for white supremacy. It is just to say that the ideology expressed by them exists for a reason. This noxious ideology grew from legitimate grievances with racist Jewish business owners and landlords.

Media's red herring

In reality, West's and Irving's respective remarks aren't even the most concerning development in the fraught dynamic between the Black and Jewish communities. More alarming is the corporate media's attempt to increase the wedge driven between the two communities.

The U.S. corporate media will never tell us the truth about our true class enemy, the billionaires and their political henchmen, most of whom are racist white men. Instead, outlets like [CNN](#), [NPR](#), and [Newsweek](#) will do everything in their power to obfuscate legitimate social issues and instead pit oppressed communities against one another.

When Black celebrities espouse backwards or antisemitic beliefs, corporate media seizes on the opportunity to stoke conflict between the Black and Jewish communities.

Ruling class media accomplishes this division by pushing a false narrative that the Black community is somehow inherently more antisemitic than others. Since West and Irving made their antisemitic remarks, mainstream news outlets have erupted in a [firestorm](#) of coverage [harping on](#) antisemitism among [Black celebrities](#) and communities.

This tactic is concerning and problematic for many reasons. It is concerning that

backwards comments from Black celebrities gets more attention and calls for accountability than Nazi-founded companies such as [Adidas](#) and [Chanel](#). It's concerning that Black celebrities lose their wealth and reputation for hateful comments, while white athlete Brett Favre is allowed to extort welfare funds from the state of Mississippi without any accountability.

It's concerning that a "Saturday Night Live" audience reacted in horror when guest host Dave Chapelle asserted that the oppression of Jews cannot be placed on the shoulders of Black Americans. That would seem obvious; however, it seems the corporate media has convinced many Democratic Party-aligned whites that Black people are indeed the central oppressor of the Jewish community.

(A better question to ask is why Chapelle, a notorious transphobe, was invited to host the "liberal" SNL during the current anti-trans panic.)

This phenomena is not only based in falsehood, but is also incredibly dangerous. The Jewish community must identify the oppressor, it's true; but the oppressor is not the Black community.





Jewish communist and transgender leader Leslie Feinberg fought racism and opposed U.S.-Israeli oppression of Palestinians. Feinberg was arrested protesting the imprisonment of CeCe McDonald, a Black trans woman, in 2012.

Unity against the common oppressor

On the contrary, the oppressor of the Jewish community is the same as that of the Black community. The oppressor is the billionaire. The oppressor is the war profiteer. The oppressor is the imperialist. The oppressor is the white supremacist. The oppressor is the Nazi. They are the ones with institutional power to carry out antisemitic oppression.

The Jewish community must reject the false narrative that the Black community, which has no such power under white supremacist capitalism, is somehow the main purveyor of antisemitism, or even somehow more proportionally antisemitic than other communities.

One must simply look at the acts of violence in recent years against the Jewish community and those at the head of the modern fascist movement to see who are the central purveyors of antisemitism: the white ruling class and their neo-Nazi running dogs.

Robert Bowers, who shot and killed 11 Jews at the Tree of Life Synagogue, is a white neo-Nazi. When hundreds of right wingers marched on Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting “Jews will not replace us,” they were hundreds of white neo-Nazis. The men who sparked a new wave of racist and antisemitic mass movements – Donald Trump, Steve Bannon, Rupert Murdoch, Alex Jones, Tucker Carlson, the list goes on – are racists, fascists and billionaires.

The ruling class is the enemy, not individual Black celebrities, nor some imagined global Jewish banking cabal.

James Baldwin asserted that a legitimate and candid engagement on past and current injustices between the Black and Jewish communities would be of “inestimable value.” This reconciliation can only occur when Jewish communities

reject racism and take responsibility for the struggle going forward against the common enemy, the capitalist system.

The ongoing corporate media propaganda only serves to shift blame for antisemitism and racist hatred onto oppressed communities, when those communities should instead be joining in solidarity in the fight to build workers' power, end racist police terror and liberate all people from U.S. imperialism.

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